

Gīta's concept of *niṣkāmakarma* (disinterested action)

(NB: This material is a verbatim copy from various sources)

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is the dialogue between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna just before the battle of Mahābhārata, a war between the virtuous Pāṇḍava brothers and their cousins the unrighteous Kauravas. The dialogue is prompted by Arjuna as he is engulfed by sorrow and misgivings on fighting his relatives. The *Gītā* consists of spiritual/philosophical advice, mostly unrelated to the setting, that Kṛṣṇa gives to Arjuna. *Niṣkāmakarmayoga* is one of the *yogas* propounded by him as a path to Mokṣa (salvation).

Karmayoga or *niṣkāmakarma* translates as acting without desires or emotional attachments to the fruits of one's deeds. In the *Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa preaches Arjuna to fight the battle of Dharma and remain detached from the consequences. He tells Arjuna that his duty is to fight and he has the right only to fight; he does not have any control on the outcome (ii.47). The duty of a person as a *karmayogī* is to do the rightful Dharma without expecting anything in return for the deeds thus performed. Selfless work done with wholehearted effort and perfection is the *karmayoga* way for the worldly person to realize his inner self and reach God.

Lord Kṛṣṇa advocates *niṣkāmakarmayoga* as the *yoga* of selfless action and as one of the ideal paths to realize the truth. He says that allocated work done without expectations, motives, or anticipation of its outcome purifies one's mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason and the benefits of renouncing the work itself. In order to achieve Mokṣa (liberation), it is important to control all mental desires and tendencies to enjoy pleasures of the senses. Per Hinduism, the gist of mundane life centers around *karma*. An interesting analogy is that virtual currency unit in the virtual bank of "*saṃskāri*" is karma. The understanding of karma, *niṣkāmakarma*, and *karmasaṃnyāsa* is essential to overcome it. It is believed that a man is born with certain *saṃskāras*, his past pushes him towards doing certain karma and these karmas are then deposited in his virtual account. The process continues until the individual attains a zero balance, wherein one achieves liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Following the practice of *karmayoga*, an individual can potentially become a true spiritual seeker and realize his true nature as *ātman*. He can live in and work for this world but still remain untouched by the grossness of mundane pleasures.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* regards the attainment of God as the highest good. The *Gītā* teaches three different paths to reach this goal: *Karmayoga*, *Jñānayoga*, and *Bhaktiyoga*. **The path of disinterested performance of duties as service of God is *Karmayoga*. Allocated work done without expectations, motives, or thinking about its outcomes tends to purify one's mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason and the benefits of renouncing the work itself.** The path of knowledge of God is *Jñānayoga*. The path of devotion to God is *Bhaktiyoga*. These three paths are the means of God-realization. The *Bhagavad Gītā* emphasizes the performance of duties related to one's station in life without any desire for fruits, and without attachments and aversion to other selfish and base emotions. Duty must be performed for the sake of duty (xviii.2). Duties ought to be done for the attainment of God. The *Gītā* enjoins the performance of duties for the welfare or solidarity of humanity (iii.20) and duties ought to be performed for the good of all creatures i.e., mankind and sentient creation (xii.4).

According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, action is better than inaction. Life depends upon action. No one can remain inactive for a single moment (iii.5; xviii.11). Inaction is death (ii.8). According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, there are four castes, brāhmaṇas, kṣatriya, vaiśyas, and śūdras according to their qualities and actions (iv.13). Different psychological tendencies, purity (*sattva*), energy (*rajas*) and ignorance (*tamas*), constitute their nature (*svabhāva*). *Sattva* predominates in the brāhmaṇas. *Rajas* predominates in the kṣatriyas, to which *sattva* is subordinate. *Rajas* predominates in the vaiśyas, to which *tamas* is subordinate. *Tamas* predominates in the śūdras, to which *rajas* is subordinate (*Śankarabhāṣya on Bhagavad Gītā*, iv.13). Their duties are appropriate to their psychological nature (xviii. 41). They can realize their highest personal good and social good by performing their specific duties (*svadharma*) (xviii.23). If

they try to perform the duties of others endowed with a different mental constitution they will become misfits (xviii. 47).

The *Bhagavad Gītā* anticipates Bradley's conception of "My station and its duties." Every individual is born with particular aptitudes. By performing his own specific duties appropriate to his station in society, he can contribute to the good of the society, and realize his infinite self. This doctrine of Bradley is anticipated by the *Gītā* conception of *svadharma* appropriate to *svabhāva* (xviii. 47). Only the *Gītā* enjoins the performance of specific duties for the good of humanity and the realization of God, while Bradley enjoins the performance of duties appropriate to one's station in society for the sake of self-realization or realization of the infinite self.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* mentions the following duties of the four castes. The brāhmaṇas should cultivate the virtues of sense-control, control of mind, tranquility, austerities, purity, forgiveness straight forwardness, wisdom, knowledge and faith (xviii.42). The kṣatriyas should cultivate the virtues of heroism, spiritedness, firmness, dexterity, not flying away from battle, generosity, sovereignty (xviii.43). They ought to fight a just battle (ii.31, 32). The vaiśyas should tend cattle, and carry on agriculture, trade, and commerce. The śūdras should serve the higher castes (xviii.44). The castes are different vocational groups in accordance with their qualities. They do not appear to be hereditary. An individual attains perfection by performing his own specific duties. He worships God and attains to perfection through them (xviii.45-46). One's specific duties ill-done are better than another's specific duties well-done (xviii. 47; iii. 35).

The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s classification of the specific duties of the different castes remind us of Plato's classification of duties in the different classes of men in an ideal republic. Wisdom is the special virtue of the recluse; fortitude or courage is the special virtue of the soldiers; thrift is the special virtue of the traders; temperance is the virtue of all classes; justice includes wisdom, courage, and temperance; it is realized when the rules govern wisely, the soldiers fight bravely, and the traders work with energy and thrift, and all are obedient to reason (Plato, *The Republic*).

karmaṇyevādhikāraste
mā phaleṣu kadācana
mā karmaphalahetur bhūr
mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi (ii.47).

Thy jurisdiction is in action alone;
Never in its fruits at any time.
Never should the fruits of action be thy motive;
Never let there be attachment in thee to inaction.

Acting without regard or desire for the fruits of action is one of the most constant teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It refers to "disinterested action," which is not to be confused with irresponsible or careless action. According to the law of karma an individual is responsible for his actions throughout eternity, or until he achieves *mokṣa*. The "fruits" (usually translated in the plural, though the singular *phalam* is used in Sanskrit) mean the results of actions, which are of three kinds: those of obligatory action, those of action prompted by desire, and those that arise from delusion. The first of these is really action without desire for the fruits, i.e., action which is a duty. The second and third are related to desire, and the elimination of desire for the fruits of action is basic to the *Gītā*'s teaching. The last line of the above stated verse, about "inaction" is an injunction against sloth- one of the evils associated with the *guṇa* of *tamas*, or ignorance. Action prompted by delusion is also associated with *tamas*. Thus, action prompted by greed, desire for wealth, desire for power, or desire for fame is not advised.

Specific duties ought to be performed without attachment and aversion, and any desire for enjoying their fruits (ii.47, 51; iii.8, 19; v.10, 12; vi.1, 2, 4; xvii.25; xviii 6). We have a right to actions, but not to their fruits (ii.47). We are under moral obligation to do our specific duties. But their fruits depend upon the will of God. We should renounce the fruits of our actions of God (xii. 6). Those who hanker after fruits are objects of pity (ii.42). We should dedicate all our actions to God (iii.30; v.13;

xii. 6). We should perform our duties with equanimity without any consideration of success or failure (ii.18; iv.22). The *Gītā* strongly emphasizes the renunciation of fruits of actions. Desire for fruits leads to bondage. The renunciation of desire for fruits leads to eternal peace (v.12; ix.28). One, who renounces fruits of actions and performs one's appointed duties is a true *yogin*, a true *saṁnyāsin* (vi.1). **True renunciation is the renunciation of fruits of all action** (xviii.2, 11). It is the performance of one's natural and appointed duties without attachments and desire for fruits (xviii. 9, 23, 47, 48).

We should not be actuated by love, hatred, attachment, aversion, egoism, pride, lust, anger, envy, greed, boastfulness, hypocrisy, malevolence, harmfulness, and other base emotions and passions (xviii.53, xvi.4, 10, 12, 16-18, 21; xvi.3; xii.15). We should cultivate equanimity (xiv.24, 25; xii.18). Egoistic desires for success or failure, pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, profit or loss, glory or ingloriousness should be conquered (ii.38, 48; ix.22. xii.13, 17-19). Elation and joy at good fortune and depression and sorrow at loss of good should be conquered (xii.17; ii.57). Selfish desires ought to be suppressed (ii.71). All egoistic desires should be directed to God and the good of humanity. They should be ennobled and sublimated into altruistic desires. The *Gītā* inculcates the extirpation of love and good-will for all creatures, compassion for the distressed, kindness for all, forgiveness for the guilty, modesty, humility, contentment, steadfastness and the like (xi.55; xii.13, 16; xvi.2, 3). Narrow love for wife, sons, and family should be transcended (xiii.10). Love for all should be cultivated. Devotion to the good of all creatures and welfare of humanity should be our motive of actions (xii. 4; iii.20). Selfishness should be eschewed. Selfless humanism ought to be cultivated (ii.71). The *Gītā* stresses the sublimation of egoistic desires. It does not enjoin a feelingless and desireless life of inaction. The renunciation of actions is not true renunciation. It never leads to perfection (iii.5). The renunciation of fruits of actions of God is true renunciation. The continuous and unerring performance of specific duties constitutes true renunciation. The renunciation of narrow and selfish desires and cultivation of selfless desires are true renunciation. The *Gītā* ethics is ethics of activism (iii. 4). It is not ethics of inactivism or renunciation of action. It is not anti-social. It is not escapism (v.2). It is ethics of the highest good of the individual of God-realization through selfless pursuit of the good of humanity. Therefore, it is not ethics of asceticism.

The *Gītā* condemns ritualism and ceremonialism. The performance of external rites does not necessarily purify the inner life of the spirit. It stresses the moral purity or inner motives and intentions (iv.23-33). It emphasizes the moralization of the will and sanctification of the soul. It stresses the absolute surrender of the human will to the divine will, the perfect attunement of the finite spirit to the Infinite Spirit (xviii.61, 62, 66).

The *Gītā* inculcates the cultivation of the virtues of humility, unpretentiousness, non-injury, forgiveness, straight-forwardness, service of the teacher, purity, steadfastness, self-control, dispassion for the objects of enjoyment, absence, of egoism, or altruism, knowledge of the evil of birth, death, old age, and disease, absence of attachment, absence of love for sons, wife, and home, constant balance of mind (xiii. 8-10), contentment, austerities, charity, wisdom, truthfulness, sense-control, tranquility (4-5), love and friendship for all creatures, compassion and firm determination (xii.13-14). There is a tinge of ascetic morality in the ethics of the *Gītā* in so far as it inculcates absence of love for sons, wife and home, equality towards all, and indifference to prosperity and adversity.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* regards emotions and passions as springs of action, and traces them to three primordial psychical tendencies: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. They are products of *prakṛti*, the root of psycho-physical nature, the lower nature of God. They blind the self to embodied life (xiv.5). *Sattva* is transparent and free from pain, and binds it to pleasure and knowledge. *Rajas* is in the nature of love, produces desire and attachment, and binds it to action. *Tamas* produces ignorance, infatuates it, and binds it to inadvertence laziness and sleep. *Sattva* produce pleasure. *Rajas* produces pain and action. *Tamas* produces delusion. When *sattva* overcomes *rajas* and *tamas*, it produces the knowledge of right and wrong. When *rajas* overpowers *sattva* and *tamas* it produces greed, inclination to act, enterprise, disquiet and desire. When *tamas* predominates over *sattva* and *rajas*, it produces ignorance, disinclination to act, inadvertence and delusion (xiv.6-17). Lust, anger and greed spring from *rajas*, destroy knowledge and incapacitate conscience from discriminating between right and wrong. They are hindrances to the realization of the self (iii.17-40; xvii.21). Constant thoughts of objects of enjoyment produce attachment to them. Attachment produces desire for their attainment. When desire is thwarted, anger is produced. Anger produces delusion. Delusion produces distortion of knowledge (ii.62-63).

Desires are primarily due to egoism or false identification of the self with the mind-body complex. When they are destroyed, the self acquires peace (ii.71). *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* constitute the mind. They also constitute the objects of enjoyment and suffering. They act upon their proper objects. The self is untouched by them. It erroneously identifies itself with the mind-body-complex made of the *guṇas*, and appears to enjoy and suffer. In its real nature, it is indifferent to pleasure, pain and delusion. *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are the *guṇas*.

Śankara, a staunch advocate of Advaita Vedānta, regards ignorance as the spring of actions. Actions are due to desire. Desires are due to ignorance. (Śankara's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, xvii. 66; xiii. 90). Ignorance is false identification of the self with the psycho-physical organism. There are three primal desires - desire for sons or sex-desire, desire for wealth or will-to-power, desire for happiness here and in heaven or will-to-pleasure. Other empirical desires spring from these root desires. They spring from ignorance or false egoism (*Ibid.* ii.11). Buddhism also mentions sex-desire, will-to-live, and will-to-power as the primordial desires, which are the springs of action.